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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000378

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SUBJECT: PRESS FREEDOM UPDATE - FEBRUARY/MARCH 2009

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Classified By: A/POLITICAL COUNSELOR DANIEL LAWTON, REASON 1.4(D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Following multiple attacks against journalists in January 2009 (Reftel), Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (GBRV) threats against the freedom of press continued in February and March. President Chavez recently ordered his governors and mayors to "draw a map of the media war" to determine which media are "owned by oligarchs." Domestic and international organizations sharply criticized the GBRV for the formal and informal pressure that the government and its supporters are putting on independent media outlets. Nevertheless, Embassy anticipates that the GBRV will try to restrict press freedom even further as Chavez accelerates his Bolivarian revolution in the wake of his February 15 referendum victory that eliminated term limits. End Summary.

Domestic and International Criticism

¶2. (SBU) Venezuelan Journalist Association (CNP) Vice-President Alonso Moliero called on government officials to halt physical and verbal attacks against journalists in a written statement issued on February 10. The CNP complained that "government officials have been mistreating journalists and the practice of journalism." In the statement, issued five days prior to Chavez's February 15 referendum to eliminate term limits for elected officials, Moliero condemned the violence against media workers and made an emotional appeal to stop the "climate of violence" against the Mayor of Caracas. (Note: The central government and pro-Chavez supporters have been impeding the work of opposition Caracas Mayor Antonio Ledezma since his November 2008 election. End Note.)

¶3. (SBU) Local independent media gave prominent attention to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights' (CIDH) ruling that condemned the GBRV for violating the right to information and personal integrity of twenty-six reporters. While the CIDH ruled that Venezuela did not violate the right to freedom of expression, equality before the law, or private property, the court decided that the GBRV is "responsible for not fulfilling its obligation to guarantee the practice of freedom to seek, receive, and diffuse information." The CIDH also said that that the GBRV should do more to prevent and punish acts of intimidation against journalists by third parties. The ruling stated that the GBRV should conduct investigations of the reporters' cases "efficiently and within a reasonable time period," and "adopt the necessary

measures to avoid undue restrictions and direct or indirect obstacles to the practice of the freedom to seek, receive, and diffuse information" in the future.

14. (SBU) Local independent media also covered the Inter-American Press Association's (IAPA) mid-year March 16 meeting in Asuncion, Paraguay, which condemned 46 attacks against freedom of expression in Venezuela. In its final resolution, the IAPA condemned "the killings, harassment and violence against journalists, media and their editors and owners, which are disturbing facts that characterize the Venezuelan situation." The IAPA urged the GBRV to comply with the CIDH ruling on behalf of journalists and owners of Venezuelan TV networks Radio Caracas Television (RCTV) and Globovision. In its ruling, the IAPA also denounced "the continued practice of President Chavez's Administration to use government advertising as a pressure element on independent media." At the same conference, representatives of the opposition-oriented local cable news network Globovision and Venezuela's most important free-to-air broadcaster, Venevision, traded accusations of editorial bias.

GBRV Threats Continue

15. (SBU) National Assembly (AN) Vice-President Jose Alborno announced January 15 that the only authorized outlet to broadcast live video from the legislative body is National Assembly Television (ANTV). The National Assembly has enforced the rule since the legislature resumed its sessions after the February 15 referendum. Pro-Chavez AN members have reportedly felt uneasy with live broadcasts from the floor of the chamber following the embarrassing accusation that AN

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Deputy Hugo Marquez was viewing pornography on his personal laptop on the floor of the assembly. State media later reported that Marquez was actually viewing a web-site dedicated to the prevention of breast cancer.

16. (SBU) On the March 1 broadcast of his weekly Sunday program, "Alo, Presidente," Chavez ordered pro-government governors and mayors to "draw the map of the media war" to determine which media are "owned by oligarchs." Chavez argued that if it were not for the "attacks, lies, manipulation and exaggeration of the mistakes of the government" (by the private media), his administration would enjoy much more public support. Chavez urged his elected state and local supporters "to be at the forefront of the battle." The Venezuelan president did not specify what he or his administration intended to do with the information.

17. (SBU) Manuel Villalba, the President of the National Assembly Committee on Science, Technology and Media, announced March 5 his intention to amend the Content Law that regulates radio and television' known in Venezuela as the "Gag Law." Villalba alleged that opposition media sources, "Globovision, El Nacional, El Universal, among others, are not informing the public; to the contrary, they are distorting reality and creating chaos." Villalba argued that such media outlets are "creating anxiety and worry in the population" and suggested that this year the legislature will draft laws to control content.

Incidents Against Press - February/March

18. (SBU) Fifteen armed Chavez supporters seized video equipment March 12 from Globovision journalists who were attempting to film the nationalization of a private hacienda in Aragua State. A February 7 report published by the National Press Workers Union reported 24 cases of attacks against journalists and media outlets in the month of January

alone. (Note: Based on reporting received from the Bloque de Prensa Venezolano (Venezuelan Press Block), Embassy has information on 15 attacks against the Venezuelan media in January (REFTEL), 11 attacks in February, and four attacks so far during March. End Note.)

¶9. (SBU) Attacks against the media have not been limited to the opposition. The President of the Venezuela National Journalist Association condemned the March 13 fire-bomb attack against the vehicle of the host of the stridently pro-Chavez program "La Hojilla" ("The Razor"). While nobody was injured in the incident, the owner and driver of the vehicle, pro-Chavez talk show host and former PSUV gubernatorial candidate Mario Silva, claimed that he is being threatened for his work on state television.

¶10. (C) Comment: President Chavez has promised to accelerate his Bolivarian revolution in the wake of winning public approval for the elimination of term limits in the February 15 referendum. The Venezuelan president's exhortation to his supporters to draw a "map of the media war" does not bode well for remaining independent media outlets in Venezuela, and GBRV officials regularly complain about the television cable network Globovision. With senior GBRV officials attributing public opposition to the Chavez administration to "media manipulation," Embassy anticipates the GBRV will step up its efforts to restrict freedom of the press. End Comment.

CAULFIELD